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INTEGRATING LEADERSHIP MODELS INTO ACADEMIC PRACTICE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF CENTERS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Venetia Nourii

 $\begin{array}{c} PhD(c),\\ Democritus\ University\ of\ Thrace,\\ Greece \end{array}$

Abstract:

Effective leadership in higher education today requires adaptability and collaboration to meet the growing complexities of academic environments. Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) have emerged as key players in this context, advancing faculty development and innovative teaching methods while aligning with institutional priorities. This study delves into leadership models such as transformational, shared, and complexity leadership to understand how these frameworks impact the operations and influence of CTLs. Emphasizing equity, inclusivity, and responsive strategies, CTLs are shown to foster environments that drive academic excellence and continuous growth. By examining academic literature, this study reveals how CTLs not only enhance teaching practices but mostly contribute significantly to building an institutional culture of collaboration and adaptability. The findings highlight the transformative role of CTLs in supporting educational leadership and promoting a shared vision for high-quality, inclusive learning experiences.

Keywords: leadership, models of leadership, CTLs, academia, higher education

1. Introduction

Leadership in higher education increasingly requires adaptive, collaborative approaches that respond to evolving challenges and demands for inclusive, effective learning environments. Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) have emerged as essential resources in this landscape, supporting faculty development, promoting teaching innovation, and contributing to broader institutional goals (Asimakoloulos *et al.*, 2021). By serving as hubs of instructional expertise and pedagogical support, CTLs play a critical role in advancing academic leadership. This paper examines leadership models

ⁱCorrespondence: email <u>vnouri@mbg.duth.gr</u>

that are relevant to the work of CTLs and explores how these centers influence leadership in academia. Traditional models, such as transformational and shared leadership, provide insights into the ways leaders impact institutional culture and foster collaborative goals (Avolio *et al.*, 2003; O'Connor & Quinn, 2004). However, as CTLs increasingly prioritize equity, responsiveness, and community, they adopt newer frameworks that emphasize adaptability and inclusivity (Wright *et al.*, 2018; Beeton *et al.*, 2022). These frameworks align with the CTLs' mission to support faculty in creating meaningful, equitable learning experiences. By analyzing the relationship between leadership models and CTL practices, this paper aims to clarify how CTLs contribute to shaping academic leadership. Through a review of relevant literature, it identifies the ways in which CTLs enhance teaching quality and help build a shared vision for educational excellence in higher education.

2. Literature Review at a Glance

Leadership theories have undergone significant evolution, reflecting the complexities of modern organizations and the changing nature of work. Scholars have developed a range of models to address how leadership is understood, practiced, and adapted to meet emerging challenges. The complexity leadership model is one such framework, emphasizing leadership as a dynamic and interactive process that emerges from the interactions among individuals and ideas within an organization. According to Lichtenstein *et al.* (2006), this model highlights that leadership is not solely the function of individual leaders. Instead, it is an outcome of collective behaviors, relationships, and the organization's adaptive processes. The model encourages leaders to facilitate environments that promote innovation, learning, and flexibility, recognizing that leadership effectiveness comes from the system as a whole rather than from isolated individuals.

In contrast to traditional hierarchical views, the 4R model of transformational leadership, described by McCloskey (2014), outlines four essential elements: relationships, roles, responsibilities, and results. This model emphasizes the significance of ethical leadership, which fosters strong connections, clearly defined roles, and a commitment to achieving meaningful outcomes. It promotes the idea that transformational leaders inspire and empower their followers. Rao (2014) defines transformational leadership as a style that motivates followers to accomplish extraordinary goals by focusing on values, ethics, and personal growth. Leaders who adopt this approach prioritize building trust, developing confidence, and guiding team members to reach their fullest potential. Unlike transactional or charismatic leaders, transformational leaders leave a lasting impact by preparing successors and promoting a culture of continuous improvement.

Empirical studies support the effectiveness of transformational and transactional leadership in driving positive outcomes. Antonopoulou *et al.* (2021) found that leadership outcomes are significantly linked to both leadership styles, with correlations of R=0.625

for transformational leadership and R=0.422 for transactional leadership. These findings suggest that implementing these leadership approaches can be strongly associated with enhanced leadership performance and higher satisfaction among team members. The strong relationship between transformational leadership and positive outcomes further reinforces the importance of inspiring and engaging followers, while the moderately strong link to transactional leadership highlights the effectiveness of structured, reward-based leadership in certain contexts.

Shared leadership is a complementary concept to complexity and transformational leadership. It has gained attention as organizations become more collaborative and less hierarchical. Wang *et al.* (2013) found that shared leadership significantly influences team attitudes, behaviors, and emergent states. However, its impact on team performance is often more subtle compared to traditional vertical leadership. This model is particularly relevant in complex work environments, where decision-making and responsibilities must be distributed among team members. Pearce and Wassenaar (2015) argue that modern leadership requires a shift away from centralized, command-and-control styles. Instead, shared leadership practices empower a workforce that increasingly values autonomy, collaboration, and shared influence. Leaders are encouraged to distribute power, recognize the expertise of team members, and foster an environment where diverse perspectives are valued.

Organizational structures and dynamics are further examined through Bolman and Deal's four-frame model. Bolman and Deal (1984) provide a comprehensive approach to understanding organizations by analyzing them through four distinct frames: Structural, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic. Vuori (2011) elaborates on how these frames offer leaders diverse perspectives for strategic and adaptive decision-making. The Structural Frame focuses on roles, policies, and procedures that ensure organizational efficiency. The Human Resource Frame emphasizes the importance of meeting both organizational and individual needs, creating a work environment where people feel valued and motivated. The Political Frame addresses the reality of power struggles, resource allocation, and conflict management, while the Symbolic Frame highlights the role of culture, rituals, and meaning in uniting and inspiring members. This multi-dimensional approach allows leaders to interpret and address complex organizational challenges effectively, using different strategies to achieve desired outcomes.

Universities have traditionally been viewed as centers of individual learning and knowledge dissemination. However, in the context of a rapidly evolving knowledge economy, they are increasingly being reconceptualized as learning organizations—entities that foster continuous learning and systemic adaptation across all levels (Senge, 1990). This paradigm shift emphasizes the importance of universities not only as knowledge providers but also as innovators capable of responding to dynamic challenges and opportunities in society (Garvin, 1993). By adopting the characteristics of learning organizations, such as promoting collective inquiry, fostering adaptability, and embedding systemic thinking, higher education institutions can enhance their capacity

for organizational resilience and innovation (Örtenblad, 2001). To achieve this, strategic leadership is critical in cultivating a culture of learning that permeates the institution, making learning an intentional and organization-wide process rather than an incidental activity (Bratianou, 2018).

Leadership in academic settings presents unique challenges and requires specialized frameworks. Ramsden (1998) outlines four key responsibilities for academic leaders: establishing a clear vision, empowering and enabling others, evaluating performance, and engaging in continuous personal and professional growth. Academic leaders must balance administrative duties with the need to foster an intellectual environment that supports research and teaching excellence. Gmelch and Ramsden (2000) emphasize that leadership in academia is characterized by a deep understanding of academic values and a commitment to promoting a culture of innovation and collaboration. Academic leaders must also be reflective, adapting their leadership practices to meet the evolving demands of higher education institutions.

In recent years, Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) have become critical support structures within higher education. Asimakopoulos et al. (2021) highlight that CTLs have grown significantly, especially in response to the evolving educational landscape and the increased demand for digital and distance learning resources following the COVID-19 pandemic. These centers provide comprehensive support for both teaching staff and students, focusing on course design, teaching strategies, and academic skill development. They have become essential for promoting quality teaching and learning, fostering pedagogical innovation, and ensuring that institutions can adapt to new educational challenges. The European University Association (EUA, 2024) conducted an extensive review of Learning and Teaching Centres across European higher education institutions. The report describes how these centers vary in structure, mission, and staffing but share a common goal of enhancing teaching quality. The introduction of a "virtuous cycle model" emphasizes strategic positioning, targeted actions, impact assessment, and continuous improvement. The model stresses the alignment of CTL activities with institutional priorities, the use of evidence-based practices, and the integration of sustainability into their missions.

Higher education institutions have undergone substantial transformations over the past two centuries, which have reshaped their traditional roles and functions. Wells (2013) identifies key changes, such as the emphasis on practical knowledge following the Industrial Revolution, the expansion to accommodate more diverse student populations, and the reliance on alternative funding sources. These shifts have created a need for adaptive leadership that can navigate the complexities of modern higher education. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015) advocate for quality assurance measures that support effective teaching and create a supportive learning environment. This includes developing the skills of teaching staff, promoting pedagogical innovation, and enhancing the integration of technology into educational practices.

The strategic integration of universities' missions — teaching, research, innovation, and culture —remains crucial for the continued success of higher education.

The European University Association (2021) emphasizes that these interconnected missions support Europe's democratic and pluralistic societies. Leadership plays a vital role in ensuring that these missions are synergistic and mutually reinforcing. Academic leaders are tasked with fostering environments where teaching and research excellence are pursued in tandem, creating a culture of collaboration and innovation.

3. Discussion

The role of Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) in higher education continues to be pivotal in shaping academic leadership and faculty development. CTLs have emerged as essential catalysts for promoting innovative teaching practices that directly support student success and align with institutional goals. According to Wright *et al.* (2018) and Beeton *et al.* (2022), these centers facilitate the professional growth of faculty members by offering resources, training, and mentorship programs designed to enhance pedagogical skills. Such initiatives not only elevate the quality of teaching but also contribute to a culture of continuous improvement, making academic institutions more adaptable and effective. Furthermore, educational development, defined as the practice of enhancing teaching and learning in higher education, supports institutional quality and fosters organizational change.

Academic leaders, often positioned to influence academic policies and oversee institutional management, play a critical role in supporting such transformations. As Bolden *et al.* (2008) note, leadership in academic settings involves guiding teams and processes to advance educational goals. CTLs, by fostering leadership among faculty, align with this vision by enabling instructors to contribute to broader organizational objectives.

The framework introduced by Jones (2022) aims to design professional development programs that not only enhance individual faculty skills but also lead to broader organizational transformation. This approach emphasizes that faculty development should be aligned with institutional goals to create lasting change across the organization. According to Singer (2002), teaching and learning centers can best contribute to an institution by fostering prominent, credible discussions across campus that emphasize innovative approaches to learning and teaching and offering high-quality support to instructors of all experience levels.

One of the key contributions of CTLs lies in their integration of equity and inclusion principles into faculty development. Hubball *et al.* (2013) argue that by incorporating these values into teaching practices, CTLs help drive broader institutional change. This approach aligns with responsive leadership models, such as Heifetz's (1994) adaptive leadership framework, which redefines leadership as a dynamic, participatory process focused on fostering growth and resilience amid uncertainty. Equity-oriented initiatives are increasingly critical as higher education institutions strive to create environments that support all learners. By advocating for inclusive teaching methods and

policies, CTLs contribute to a more equitable academic landscape, fostering a sense of belonging and engagement among students from various backgrounds.

CTLs also play a transformative role as change agents and advocates for equity in higher education. Recent studies have underscored the importance of advancing equity-minded practices, emphasizing the growing need for such initiatives in the academic realm. Beeton *et al.* (2022) highlight the potential of CTLs to lead efforts in embedding inclusivity within faculty training programs. By doing so, CTLs encourage equity-oriented leadership among academic staff, which is crucial in addressing the diverse and evolving needs of today's student populations. Brinthaupt *et al.* (2019) suggest that CTLs are uniquely positioned to influence institutional policies and practices, making them powerful advocates for systemic change. Additionally, CTLs facilitate collaboration among faculty members, provide tailored workshops and resources, and encourage interdisciplinary connections to enhance teaching quality and student learning outcomes (Beckley, 2022).

The concept of Hybrid Civic Universities (HCivUs), as described by Leitão *et al.* (2023), aligns with the transformative role of CTLs by emphasizing the integration of digital transformation, open innovation, and sustainability in academic governance. HCivUs redefine traditional academic roles, encouraging the adoption of digital tools and fostering inclusivity to address global challenges. CTLs, by supporting these emerging models, enhance their impact on institutional practices and regional knowledge-sharing efforts.

The effectiveness of CTLs in supporting teaching and learning is evident in their widespread adoption across higher education institutions. According to data from the European University Association (EUA, 2024), a significant majority of institutions offer training programs in pedagogy (84%) and digital skills (88%), with 44% of these institutions mandating such training for all teaching staff. The focus on developing both pedagogical and technological competencies reflects the evolving demands of the modern educational landscape, where digital proficiency is increasingly essential for effective teaching. This commitment to faculty development has grown since 2018, when only 37% of institutions required compulsory training programs. The increase indicates a recognition of the critical role that continuous professional development plays in ensuring high-quality teaching.

The presence of Learning and Teaching Centers in approximately two-thirds of higher education institutions further underscores the importance of structured support for academic staff. However, there are notable variations across different countries, reflecting disparities in how CTLs are utilized and integrated into institutional frameworks. While many centres focus on staff development and consultation, fewer offer personalized development plans or systematically analyze student feedback. This limited emphasis on individualized support and feedback analysis may hinder the ability of CTLs to tailor their services to meet the specific needs of faculty members. Despite these challenges, the primary functions of CTLs remain centered on providing shared

resources and support for teaching, which continue to be highly valued across institutions.

Although there has been a slight expansion in the roles of CTLs since 2018, the EUA (2024) data reveal a minor decline in the number of centres performing tasks such as analyzing student feedback. This trend suggests that while CTLs are maintaining their core focus on teaching support, there is room for further development in areas that promote personalized and data-driven faculty improvement. Expanding the scope of CTLs to include more targeted support mechanisms, such as individualized development plans and comprehensive feedback analysis, could enhance their impact and better address the unique needs of academic staff.

The evolving role of CTLs requires a careful balance between providing broad-based support and offering customized, strategic development for faculty. While foundational teaching resources are crucial, institutions should not overlook the value of personalized approaches that address specific faculty needs. By leveraging the expertise of CTLs and adopting innovative leadership models, institutions can implement targeted development initiatives. These strategies can strengthen teaching effectiveness, enhance faculty engagement, and promote a more innovative and student-centered educational environment that aligns seamlessly with institutional objectives.

4. Recommendations

Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) should continue promoting effective teaching practices and equity-driven leadership by integrating adaptable and collaborative leadership models. Institutions are encouraged to align CTL initiatives with broader institutional goals, focusing on faculty development, innovative teaching strategies, and inclusive policies. Future research should conduct comparative analyses of CTL strategies and policies in higher education institutions across regions, such as Europe and beyond, to identify best practices and understand how resource allocation and organizational structures influence CTL effectiveness.

5. Final Thoughts

Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) play a crucial role in transforming academic environments by promoting effective teaching practices and fostering leadership grounded in equity and collaboration. By integrating leadership models that emphasize adaptability and shared responsibility, CTLs drive faculty development and encourage a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Their influence extends beyond traditional support functions, as they advocate for inclusive policies and practices that align with institutional goals. As higher education faces ongoing challenges, CTLs are uniquely positioned to inspire innovation, support diverse learning needs, and advance institutional effectiveness. CTLs' ability to inspire forward-thinking academic cultures

highlights their vital role in supporting both faculty and students in achieving sustainable educational excellence.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Venetia-Despoina Nouri is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Molecular Biology and Genetics, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece. Her research focuses on the relationship between leadership skills and academic achievements among women bioscientists. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Greek Philology with a specialization in Linguistics from Democritus University of Thrace, a Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Education and Technologies in Distance Teaching and Learning Systems from the Hellenic Open University and is currently following a Master of Arts in Digital Humanities at Linnaeus University, Sweden.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2381-2023

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